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TAGS: PREL PTER PGOV MARR MOPS KS AF

SUBJECT: MOFAT DEPUTY MINISTER PARK TO TAKE LEAD ON  
AFGHANISTAN HOSTAGE CRISIS

Classified By: CDA Bill Stanton. Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) On August 14, Park In-kook, Deputy Minister for Policy Planning and International Organizations at MOFAT, met with the Charge d'Affaires to inform him he would be leaving the next day for Afghanistan where he would take over as lead official for the South Korean government's handling of the Korean hostage crisis in Ghazni Province. DM Park said he would arrive in Kabul on the afternoon of August 16 and would be staying there for the next two weeks. He would have responsibility over all the other Korean military, diplomatic, and intelligence officials working on the hostage issue, Park said, including overseeing the Korean Embassy team in Kabul, Korean civilian and military officials working the issue out of the PRT in Ghazni, as well as National Intelligence Agency (NIS) officials currently operating in Afghanistan. He told the Charge he planned to bring an additional MOFAT official with him and reduce the number of NIS officials on the team, indicating an effort by the foreign ministry to take control of a combined ROKG interagency effort that has reportedly been operating in some disarray.

¶2. (C) DM Park and the Charge both welcomed the news that two of the female Korean hostages had been released by their Taliban captors earlier in the day, and that they appeared to be in reasonably good health. DM Park thanked the U.S. Government for the friendship, assistance and goodwill it had provided during this very difficult time for the Korean people. He asked for post's assistance in arranging to meet with Ambassador Wood in Kabul on Monday, August 20. The Charge offered to convey that request to Embassy Kabul, with his recommendation that the Ambassador meet with Park on the 20th, or as soon thereafter as possible.

¶3. (C) For the remainder of the meeting, DM Park asked a series of questions concerning U.S. policy on hostages. The

Charge explained the principles behind the U.S. policy. He pointed out that while the USG would continue to provide all appropriate support to its Korean ally in its time of need, U.S. officials in Afghanistan were operating under strict guidelines -- recently reiterated by President Bush and President Karzai in Washington -- that prohibit the swapping of hostages for Taliban prisoners. DM Park said he understood the U.S. position. He noted that it was "actually a sort of international standard" and wistfully added that he wished he had the U.S. policy to work with. Because he did not, however, DM Park asked whether the USG would consider asking the Government of Afghanistan (GOA) to swap some "less notorious" prisoners for the hostages, or to commute the sentences of some Taliban prisoners. The Charge firmly replied that the problem with such "creative alternatives," already suggested by DFM Shim Youn-joe, was that they constituted concessions to the Taliban that by rewarding bad behavior would only encourage them to take more hostages.

¶4. (C) Park acknowledged the dangers ROK negotiators were facing in dealing with an unscrupulous adversary. He said he was not sure of the Taliban's true intent. For that reason he said he intended to proceed in a cautious manner because he did not wish to set any undesirable precedents by his actions. He confirmed that the ROK negotiators had thus far held two major meetings with the Taliban, and 2-3 smaller meetings. He was unsure when they would next meet again. He pledged to the Charge that he would work to improve communication within the ROK team in Afghanistan, as well as between the ROK team and its counterparts in the GOA and at the PRT, to reduce the chances of miscommunication.

STANTON